

Twin Parasites

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Summary: Truth is finally gone. The HumanCovenant War is over. But for the Master Chief, the battle has just begun...because the Flood aren't the only parasite in the universe...

1. Prologue: The End of an Era

Twin Parasites

By Bass GSX

****Prologue: The End of an Era****

"I have your back, Demon", the Arbiter said softly as he and the Master Chief burst through a doorway in the Pious Inquisitor, the Prophet of Truth's personal flagship. The silver-clad Elite swept his Carbine over the area behind them, and the Chief studied the surrounding room in front of them through the scope of his Battle Rifle.

"Nothing visible. Let's keep moving", the Spartan told the Elite. The Arbiter nodded.

"It's not much farther to Truth's quarters. We don't have much time..." he growled. John-117 grunted in acknowledgement. They reached another door; this time, it was locked. The Arbiter punched in a few strange looking keys, and the door slid open with a quiet, mechanical whine. They slowly strode into a spacious room, and suddenly green lasers streaked out of nowhere, and a purple lance barely missed Master Chief's head.

"This is it! Truth is most definitely in this room!" the Arbiter cried, his shields flaring as multiple Carbine rounds struck them. The Chief put his eye to the scope on the Battle Rifle and sent three nine millimeter rounds through the nearest Brute's ugly skull. The Brute groaned as he collapsed to the ground. Another purple lance headed for him, but the Arbiter then put a Carbine shot into the

Jackal sniper's forehead, sending him backwards into the air. A Carbine round fried the barrel of the Battle Rifle clutched in Master Chief's arms, so he dropped it and pulled out the spare weapon clipped to his belt. A hissing noise caused the remaining Brutes to freeze. Though it was somewhat dark in the room, a blue glow illuminated the enemy they had hated since they had seen him.

"You picked up...?" the Arbiter gasped. John snorted.

"I grab what I can", he replied. The Spartan adjusted his grip on the Energy Sword and held it in a ready stance, two-pronged blade out in front of him. A Brute, enraged, dropped his own weapon and let out a series of unintelligible snarls and grunts. He dropped to all fours and began to rush at the Chief. John waited till the very last second, side-stepped, and stabbed the Brute in the back with the sword, beam blade sticking out through the Brute's stomach. It whimpered, then died. The Spartan turned to see the Arbiter stick a plasma grenade to a Brute's forehead, then shoot its partner three times in the chest, striking the heart and killing it. The very last Brute began to berserk as well, but the Arbiter smashed its face in with the butt of his stocky Covenant Carbine.

"Now, where are you...?" Master Chief muttered. His question was answered with a golden-yellow beam of charged energy.

"Do they all have chairs that do that?" the Chief asked over his com link with the Arbiter.

"Pretty much", the silver-armored Elite replied. A hovering platform held the Prophet of Truth.

"Traitor to the Covenant! Why have you led the very antithesis of your faith into this holy place?" the Prophet cried, desperately trying to stop the Arbiter's charge.

"It is you who is the traitor! Leading us to believe that the Sacred Rings would save us!" the Arbiter snarled. He emptied the charge pack on his Carbine into Truth, but the lasers were repelled by the powerful shields on the hovering chair. The charge beam swept across the Arbiter's position, forcing him to seek cover behind a column.

"Forget about someone?" a voice growled behind the Prophet.

"Demon! How can you...why do the Gods not strike you down in my presence?" Truth gasped. Master Chief dove for the chair as it began to fly away. He grasped the edge, and his immense weight made it tip. The Chief pulled himself aboard, wound his arm back, and slammed a powerful, rage-fueled right hook into the Prophet's left cheek. Blood and several teeth sprayed out from the Prophet's mouth. John grabbed the Prophet by the neck and hurled him from the chair, jumping off and landing beside the thrown Truth. Then, as a final irony, the Spartan activated his Energy Sword and slashed the frail Truth in half. The chair slowly glided to the ground. The Arbiter stepped out from behind the column he had taken cover behind and sighed.

"This war...is over", he said slowly, mandibles clicking with exhausted joy. Master Chief took off his helmet, resting it in the crook of his arm. The Arbiter did the same. They shook hands, then walked off together, weapons forgotten in the room with Truth's

lifeless body. It was only a short Slipspace jump back to Earth...

2. Another Visor

Twin Parasites

By Bass GSX

****Chapter One: Another Visor****

Click. Click. Click.

The Battle Rifle was disassembled, cleaned, then reassembled. The Chief checked his stopwatch. One minute, forty-two seconds. He was slowing down, now that the war was finally over. Heavy footsteps caused him to snap up, Battle Rifle raised to head-level. Those footsteps were an Elite's. The Arbiter stood in the doorway, mandibles twitchingâ€”the equivalent of a human grin.

"A little high-strung, Demon?" he chuckled.

"Just used to pulling triggers whenever I hear a _Sangheili_ walking..." the Master Chief replied, also smiling. He was wearing his dress uniform, as Admiral Sir Terrence Hood was expecting him in twenty minutes. The Arbiter wore his silver, medieval knight-esque armor. An Energy Sword rested in his grip, inactive.

"I came to give you...a gift. It was my father's sword. I wish it to be...a peace offering. For all the trouble I and my race have caused you", the Arbiter said slowly. He held out his hand. The Chief took the sword. Etched into the grip were curled letters, Covenant script...beside them was an almost illegible attempt at Standard. The Spartan strained to read it, studying each individual letter in the four-letter scrawl. His eyes widened when he finally deciphered itâ€”JOHN.

"You know my...?" Master Chief whispered. The Arbiter averted his eyes.

"Your teacher...the one called Mendez...I asked about you because I was curious. I am sorry", he apologized.

"No...I appreciate it. Here. Take this", the Chief said. He pulled out the old helmet for the MJOLNIR Mk V armor, which rested under his bed as a memento from Halo.

"Are you sure?" the Arbiter asked cautiously. John-117 smirked.

"I could ask the same about this sword. It's a family heirloom...so's that helmet", the human said.

"But your family didn't have this-" the _Sangheili_ warrior started.

"My family died on Reach. But they did have these", the Spartan sighed, deep sadness and longing bubbling up to the surface of his emotions. The Arbiter looked away.

"With humility and exceeding gratitude, I accept your gift. May you always have the blessed wind to refresh your tired soul", the silver-clad Elite said softly. He walked off. The Chief checked the clock beside his bunk. 10:53 a.m. The ceremony would start in seven minutes. Master Chief rose and walked out into the hall. A lone weapon was strapped to his waistâ€"an inert, black and silver hilt.

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"Spartan-117, reporting", John saluted Admiral Hood. The admiral returned the salute respectfully. The Spartan towered over the superior officer...and everyone else at the ceremony as well. John didn't like sticking out, but apparently that was his lot in life. Everyone cheered for him.

"Master Chief, on behalf of all UNSC forces, I'd like to thank you. But not just you...all the Marines who fought and died for this day...and all the Spartans who gave their lives for Reach, even though..." Lord Hood's voice faded as he approached the subject of the fallen military planet. Now a charred hunk of rock and dust, there were no practical uses for Reach.

"Sir, thank you, sir", the Chief replied. A pedestal next to him lit up with an unusual figure. It caused the Spartan's eyes to widen in disbelief.

"_You!_" the Master Chief hissed in surprise.

"Miss me, Chief? Maybe _I_ should've been promising when you left High Charity..." Cortana grinned.

"But you...but Gravemind..." the Spartan stammered.

"I'm the Mark Two. Be careful what you wish for..." the smart-mouthed AI smirked.

"A token of our thanks..." Admiral Hood said softly. The Chief pulled out the chip that held Cortana, cradled it in his palm, and saluted smartly.

"Dismissed, Master Chief", was Hood's last remark. John turned and walked down the stairs, heading out the door to the side.

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"Chief...can I talk to ya?" a sharp voice asked. The Spartan turned from disassembling his Battle Rifle to face Sergeant Major Avery Johnson. The Spartan nodded.

"Hey...Ah was just wonderin'...you stayin' fo' the parteh? I hear Cap'n Keyes's got some great ideas..." the loud-mouthed sergeant asked. John shook his head.

"No...I don't think so. I think I'll take a transport out to some colony...start a new life where no one knows me", he replied.

"Good luck with _that_, Mastah Chief. Most likeleh evereh-one on a human colony and _definitleh_ alla Covenant know who you are",

Johnson chuckled. The Chief sighed.

"Well...I'll find somewhere. Tell the captain I'm sorry I couldn't go to her party", he told the sergeant. Johnson nodded.

"Will do. Been nice workin' with ya, Mastah Chief. You've been a hero to us all..." Johnson told him before walking from the room. The Master Chief assembled the Battle Rifle and stood. He walked over to the suit of armor resting in its rack. He ran his hands along the chestplate, admiring its smooth, green surface. _The MJOLNIR Mk VI..._ he thought. Piece by piece, he placed the armor on himself. His heavy metal boots echoed through the hall as he strode for the hangars, Battle Rifle in the crook of his arm. He found a Prowler and headed for it when he heard a shout.

"Chief! Wait!" a woman's voice called. The huge Spartan turned to face Captain Miranda Keyes.

"Captain Keyes", John saluted. She saluted in response.

"Before you go...I have some things for you", the captain said.

"Like...?" the Chief asked. He turned to the door to see a team of Marines hauling several boxes into the hangar.

"Going-away presents. As a reminder of Earth", Miranda told him. The cyborg sighed inwardly at the hold-up, but said nothing. The Marines loaded the crates into the small cargo storage of the Prowler, then jogged off.

"Humanity will always remember you, Chief. It's been an honor, no, a blessing working with you", Miranda said softly. The Spartan nodded.

"And with you, captain", he replied. The armored soldier stepped into the cockpit of the Prowler and reached for a button when a voice came through his speakers.

"How about you relax and I drive?" Cortana MkII suggested.

"Whatever works, Cortana", he replied. The Master Chief pulled her data storage chip out from his helmet and inserted it into the computer interface slot in the Prowler's dashboard. It lifted from the hangar and sped out into space, quickly engaging its Shaw-Fujikawa drive and jumping to Slipspace.

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"No bounties...this job is getting dull. I wish I had somewhere to go...someone to talk to..." Samus sighed glumly. She had already run several system diagnostics on her armor and polished it a couple times, too. When there were no jobs...her life was quite boring. Suddenly, an alarm blared on her readouts.

"WARNING! Unidentified ship jumping insystem!" text flashed across the console of her Hunter-class gunship. Samus flicked a few switches and entered a command, heating the plasma turrets of her gunship up to operational status. A sleek, black, contoured craft appeared out of a shimmering blue tear in space, which quickly closed. A hail

transmission appeared on her console. Samus returned the hail and engaged her radio.

"Identify yourself", she said simply.

"Master Chief Spartan-117, retired UNSC military personnel. And my questioner is...?" came a rough, battle-hardened voice. Human, though...and he spoke Standard.

"Samus Aran. Bounty hunter from the Outer Colonies. Been a while since I've seen a human. I heard something about a big war in the Inner Colonies, though. Was it a civil war, or...?" Samus asked. There was silence on the other line.

"Hello? Do I still have contact?" she questioned.

"Maybe we should find somewhere to land...and talk in person", the Chief replied softly. Samus detected a note of something...sadness? It sounded like herself, when she told other people about her...late parents.

"Sure. I've got a planet nearby that's actually quite nice, if it hasn't changed since I last visited", Samus told him cheerfully. She pushed the throttle forward, making her ship accelerate. The black craft that held this retired soldier followed her closely. They began entry into the atmosphere of a seemingly tropical planet called Tallon IV. Samus' ship's retro-rockets fired and the landing gear unfolded. The ship beside her did likewise. They touched down softly on an open plain. Samus walked over to her suit and put it on. She primed her Arm Cannon. No telling whether this "Master Chief" was dangerous or not...

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"Are you really going outside with this person? We don't even know if she's safe or not!" Cortana objected. Master Chief walked over to where his armor rested.

"That's why I'm putting this on", he replied. He heard a mechanical buzzing noise, a few whines, and...was that humming?

"Oh, I forgot about him. Captain Keyes saved him for you...said you'd understand", Cortana giggled.

"'Him'? What do you-!" the Spartan asked, cut off as a bag shot open.

"Greetings! I am Three-Four-Three Guilty Spark, the Monitor of Installation Zero-Four. Oh, hello again. It is so nice to see you again, Reclamer. We have much work to do. I am a genius", the floating, blue-grey orb chirped, apparently no worse for the wear.

"Cortana, you lousy-!" the Chief glowered. He grabbed the Monitor, stuffed him back into the sack, and then locked him in a crate. Then, the human opened another crate and picked up a Battle Rifle, five clips for it, two Magnums, spare clips for them, and a quartet of frag grenades.

"What, do you think the Covenant are going to go against their word?"

Cortana teased.

"Hah. You're funny", the Spartan snorted before exiting the Prowler. He came face to face with a suit of orange, red, and yellow armor. The shoulder plates were bizarrely shaped, not to mention large and bulky. This bounty hunter, Samus Aran, was a good eight inches shorter than he, maybe more. Samus studied him as well...but through her Scan visor.

"Hmm...recharging energy shields, auto-targeting system, temperature regulators...pretty good stuff", she mused to herself. The Chief extended a hand.

"I'm...John", he offered. She took his hand.

"Samus", was her reply. Their helmets came off with a hiss. Samus was taken aback. He was handsome! Close-cropped brown hair, icy blue eyes, sharp, intimidating cheekbones...he was a little too pale, but so was she, right? The suit did that to a warrior...Samus liked this guy already. The Chief was a little surprised by this bounty hunter person as well. She had pale blue eyes that burned with a fire of internal rage...the Spartan knew how that felt. Her blond hair spilled over her upper armor, and she had red, full lips. She was very pale, almost ivory...but John knew why.

"Umm...so...do you know anything about the war I heard rumors of?" Samus asked, starting the conversation. Her new acquaintance's countenance darkened, and something appeared in his icy eyes...rage? Hatred?...Both?

"I fought in that war. It was a collection of alien races versus us humans. It...wasn't pretty, but now, after so many years, it's over", the Chief spoke in a clipped tone.

"Oh. Was it...fairly even? Is that why it took so long?" Samus inquired, very curious.

"Hell no! Even? It was slaughter! Every time we had even a small victory on the ground, they'd draw back to space...then glass the whole damn planet. Emerald Coast...Reach...so many colonies...so many planets..." John snarled, pounding an enraged fist into the Prowler. His strike bent the Titanium-A plating in four inches.

"I...I'm sorry to have awoken those feelings. Hey...you wanna drink?" Samus apologized, motioning towards her ship. The Master Chief nodded.

"Sure. Let me take off my suit, and I'll join you in your ship", he replied. He picked up his helmet and Battle Rifle and walked off into his Prowler. Samus nabbed her helmet as well and walked into her own ship.

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"So...she cute?" Cortana teased. The Chief rolled his eyes.

"Yeah. So?" he replied. Cortana brought a hand to her cheek.

"I'm insulted. You're cheating on me", the smart-mouthed AI joked, faking hurt.

"Hey, Cortana. Input system commandâ€"codeword 'Kiss My Ass'", John growled. Secretly, when she wasn't looking, the Spartan grinned. The...unorthodox AI was probably his closest friend, seeing as they had shared a body for the past couple years. After setting his Battle Rifle down with care, the Spartan dusted himself off, checked himself in the mirror, and walked for the egress ramp.

"You really groomed yourself well, Chief", Cortana teased.

"Thanks", the human replied.

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"Do you think he will be a good ally, Lady?" the gunship's AI, a reconstruction of Samus' old boss, Adam, questioned.

"He seems nice enough. There's a lot of...rage in him. Loss. Might be dangerous", Samus noted while removing the sections of her Power Suit.

"And there isn't any in you? You seem to have turned out quite nicely..." Adam commented. Samus sighed. He had a point. She heard a knocking on the top hatch of her ship.

"Just a minute!" Samus called. She looked around for some decent clothing to put on. For maximum comfort, she wore just the bare essentials under her Power Suit, but...in public, what she wore under the armor was embarrassing. Finding jeans and a tank top, Samus quickly put them on.

"Come in!" Samus called. The hatch irised open, and the seven-foot-tall warrior dropped in, causing a shock wave to reverberate throughout the flight deck. Samus admired him out of the corner of her eye. He was incredibly muscular, and the khakis and long-sleeve shirt did nothing to hide his bulging biceps, pecs, and thighs. Master Chief looked Samus over as well as she searched for beverages. She had a very curvy figure, and her tank top didn't hide much in the way of her upper body. The Chief forced his eyes away from her chest and studied the rest of her. Her arms were well-muscled, and he noted that the left triceps were very well-developed...maybe from swinging on some sort of rope. Her legs were long and slender, but he couldn't see the muscles covered by her jeans.

"I have wine and soda...which do you prefer?" Samus asked, holding up a can of cola and a bottle of wine.

"Wine, please", the Spartan requested. Samus took out two glasses and filled them both halfway.

"Thanks", he said.

"So...tell me about yourself. Where are you from?" Samus asked, sipping the purplish red wine.

"Eridanus Two. It was glassed by the Covenant during the war. I was taken as a small child and trained to be a soldier...and I have some modifications to my body as well. And you're from...?" the Chief replied, taking small sips of his wine as well.

"A colony. Can't remember the name. The Space Pirates destroyed it, killed my parents. I hate them. I hate them!" Samus snarled suddenly, shaking.

"Easy. Save the rage for when it's needed", John advised. You've lost your family? That makes two of us...

"Your suit. What's it called?" Samus asked, changing the subject.

"MJOLNIR Mark VI. It's niceâ€"recharging shields, radiation protection, auto-targeting, motion tracker, reflex enhancer, strength amplifier. Yours?" Master Chief returned.

"Chozo Varia Suit. It allows me to survive in extreme temperatures, modifies my jump with jets, has a cannon attached to the right arm and a grappling hook on the left", Samus replied. The Chief nodded.

"So...where are we?" he asked. Samus smiled.

"Tallon IV. It's a planet formerly inhabited by the race of bird-people who gave me that suitâ€"the Chozo. Want a tour? You'd better suit up", Samus grinned. The Spartan smiled in reply.

"Sure. Meet me outside", he said. He walked out. Samus sighed.

"Wow. What a person!" she blinked.

"You're attracted to him, Lady", Adam observed. Samus huffed.

"And what makes you think that?" she said.

"I noted your increased heart rate when talking to him and your blushing when he looked at you. Also, you studied him quite...intently", the AI responded. Samus attached the final component to her suit, then locked the helmet in place.

"Whatever", Samus snorted. Maybe I am attracted to him. I guess we'll just have to see...

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"So...gimme an update on your new squeeze", Cortana joked as he entered the Prowler for the second time.

"Maybe if you didn't make fun of my new friend every time I walk in here, then I'd tell you", John growled, smirking.

"Oh, your friend? Did you forget the 'girl' at the front of 'friend'? Or are you 'just friends'?" Cortana grinned.

"I don't know what you're prodding at, Cortana, but don't make me shut down all power to all systems", the Chief glowered.

"Ooh, you really know how to turn a girl off", the AI snickered. She shrugged as the Spartan attached his helmet with a hiss.

"Have fun, be back before eleven", Cortana waved. The Master Chief

returned the wave, and walked out, Battle Rifle slung over his shoulder.

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"And this is the Arboretum", Samus said as the pair of them walked into a huge dome. In the center of a lake was a gigantic tree. On its branches, there were platforms that spiraled up so high the Chief couldn't see where they ended. The light was fading quickly.

"We should head back to our ships, John. It gets dangerous in the nighttime..." Samus noted. The Master Chief nodded.

"Funny how that works..." he commented. They trekked back through several halls and soon reached the elevator.

"This will take us back near our landing site", Samus commented. On the long elevator ride up, the Spartan noticed that the woman beside him was slowly but surely edging closer and closer to him. Their hands brushed.

"Oh...sorry", Samus blushed, even though it could barely be seen past her visor. She could see no facial features of the soldier beside her because of the impersonal orange faceplate.

"It's alright", he replied. Their hands touched again. Samus was about to say something when the Spartan grasped her hand. She closed her mouth quickly and squeezed his hand. He squeezed back. Even through the armor, each could feel something akin to electricity flowing through their veins. The elevator lurched to a halt, and the armored pair walked hand in hand through the adjoining tunnels. They came out into the plain where they had landed and walked towards their ships.

"See you tomorrow, John", Samus said, sad that she had to lose his hand from hers.

"Sleep well, Samus", John replied, just as downcast. They each walked up their own loading ramp and suited down. They went to their beds, and fell into a deep, restful sleep.

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"Chief! Chief, wake up, there's a problem!" Cortana's urgent voice shook Master Chief into a dreary wakefulness.

"What's wrong...?" he said slowly.

"I've been talking to Spark, and-" she started.

"That piece of shit?" John growled.

"It's more than that. Listen!" Cortana said forcefully. The blue, self-sustaining AI hovered about head-level with the Chief.

"Greetings, Reclaimer. My scanning shows that there are shards of Installation Zero-Four embedded all over this planet. We must hurry if we are to-" 343 Guilty Spark started.

"Waitâ€Zero-Four...Halo?" John stammered, instantly awake and alert. Cortana nodded.

"Apparently, the explosion caused by the _Autumn_ made a ripple in Slipspace...and pieces of Halo got through. They landed here. And that means..." she trailed off.

"The Flood", he finished.

3. Make New Foes, But Keep the Old

Twin Parasites

By Bass GSX

****Chapter Two: Make New Foes, But Keep the Old****

"Samus! Samus, open the hatch!" an urgent voice yelled. The harsh sound of metal pounding metal awoke the sleeping bounty hunter.

"What is it?" she asked, annoyed at being woken up at such an hour.

"Something extremely important! Suit up, and _hurry!_" she recognized the voice.

"John, this better not be a-" Samus started drowsily.

"I will break this hatch and dress you myself if I must", a cold voice replaced John's previous urgent tone. This coldness frightened the blond woman and made her leap from her bed.

"Suiting up right now, John. Sorry", she replied. She checked the readouts on her HUD. Missiles fully charged, Arm Cannon primed and running, all systems active...

"Coming!" Samus yelled. She jumped into the grav-lift and soared out of the hatch, corrective boosters softening her fall. She saw the Master Chief hop off her ship, a long, tubular black thing tucked in his arm.

"And what, exactly, is _that_?" Samus asked, intrigued.

"You've never seen a slug-thrower, have you?" the Chief replied.

"Slug-thrower?" she said, not understanding. John sighed.

"This is an M90 Tactical Assault Shotgun. Close-range. If the shoe fits..." he told her.

"Umm...okay. Whatever", Samus responded. She checked his armament. Two small black things were tucked at his waist, as well as some roundish, green things and two funny shaped blue things. Another, more angular black thing was strapped across his back, and a silver-black hilt of some sort was hooked onto his belt.

"You have anything that uses plasma, maybe fire?" the Chief asked.

Samus switched her Arm Cannon to the Plasma Beam setting.

"Plasma Beam, or the Flamethrower", she replied, waving the elongated cannon at him.

"It'll do. Save it for the bigger ones", the Spartan instructed. Samus cocked her head as they ran for a hatch.

"Bigger ones? Wait, what are we doing, anyway?" she asked him, very confused.

"There is a parasite on this planet. It's called the Flood. In its Infection form, it uses penetrator tentacles and a spinal tap in order to mutate its victim into a zombie warrior with amplified strength and a nigh-suicidal jumping tendency", the Chief explained. Samus mulled this over, then swore.

"Damnation! It's not the only parasite here", Samus growled. This time it was John's turn to tilt his head.

"What do you mean?" he asked. They burst out of a hatch and faced a canyon...filled with the bulbous, obscenely writhing Infection Forms.

"I'll...I'll tell you later..." Samus breathed.

"Cortana...is this the place you were talking about?" the Chief gasped.

"Why, no, Reclaimer. The area with the most infestation is actually quite far from this zone. Please follow my further instructions to reach that zone", Guilty Spark's ringing, metallic voice sounded over his suit's com systems. A single Infection Form turned to face the pair of armored warriors, hissed with delight, and alerted the Flood around him. Roaring with anger, the Master Chief slung the shotgun and pulled out the twin Plasma Rifles he had armed himself with. Firing short bursts from them, he kept the Flood off his back. Meanwhile, Samus tore through the Flood ranks with a rain of Power Beams, and the area in front of her was alive with the orange energy projectiles. However, there were far too many for them to handle by just the two of them.

"Fire in the hole!" the Chief yelled by instinct, hurling a frag grenade into an enterprising gang of Infection Forms headed for him. They erupted as the frag detonated, and a penetrator slapped against his shields from the explosion. Remembering his last encounter with one of the penetrators, the Spartan shuddered and kept firing. Soon, the Flood thinned out, then there were none left.

"Well, that was harrowing. Bigger ones? What did you-" Samus started, breathing heavily. She was cut short as an arm with tentacles sprouting like some disease struck her in the lower back and sent her spiraling into the air. Samus crashed hard and groaned in pain. The Master Chief backed up to cover her as three Combat Forms leaped at him. A loud bam echoed through the canyon, and a Combat Form exploded as the sheer amount of eight-gauge Magnum buckshot tore into its squishy, murderous body. The Chief's shields drained as the pair of Combat Forms he hadn't killed struck him at the same time. One charged for the finishing blow, then exploded in fire as a thick, powerful beam of red plasma nailed him. Samus gave him a thumbs-up,

rising slowly. The Chief ducked a swing from the last Combat Form and rose, barrel of the shotgun right in the Combat Form's chest.

"Say cheese", he growled. A giant, foot-wide hole erupted in the Combat Form's chest. Samus and the Spartan sighed.

"What are...were these?" she asked prodding the bodies warily with her boot. John studied them.

"Elites. We'll probably fight humans and Elites, because those were the only creatures that the Flood could harness as Combat Forms...at least, in my experience", he told her. Samus shuddered as she looked at the rotted, fleshy body. The pair heard a strange half-roar, half-choke and turned to face not one, not three, but eight Combat Forms charging them, and a legion of Infections to boot. Not to mention three bulbous, hideous waddling things making a slow but steady beeline for them.

"Shit. Umm, what was it you said? Fire in the hole?" Samus asked.

"Yeah, it was", John replied, confused at why she was asking that. Suddenly, Samus was replaced by a bizarre orange ball about a meter in diameter. A glowing round thing was placed near the ball, and it rolled quickly away. A huge, domed explosion knocked half the Combat Forms off their feet, and destroyed some Infection Forms. The Carrier Forms that were advancing on Samus and Master Chief were too far away to be affected by the blast. However, to Samus' horror, she watched as an Infection Form scurried over to a fallen Combat Form and dug into its chest cavity. The Combat Form rose, seemingly undaunted, and leaped at her.

"_Now_ you see why I asked about burning the bodies", John growled. He blew the top half of a Combat Form off with his shotgun and fed three rounds into the firing chamber, pumping it to refresh the chamber. The newly reanimated Combat Form leaped at Samus, who fired a charged up Plasma Beam, causing the Combat Form to burst into flames. Scorched, it hit the ground and fell apart. Another of the four Combat Forms threw itself at them, but was knocked out of the air by the M90 shotgun, its flesh ripped apart by the eight-gauge Magnum shot. Samus charged up her beam, then harnessed the stored energy, tapping into her missile reserves. A stream of fire erupted from her Arm Cannon. She swept it over their foes, setting them all on fire and popping the fragile Infections. The bulbous Carrier Forms fell backwards from the damage, exploding open and sending a new wave on Infection Forms at the armored warriors.

"Oh, great...these ones make _new_ Flood?" Samus muttered. The Chief pulled out his twin Plasma Rifles and mopped up the Infections, with help from Samus' Power Beam.

"That took far too long, Reclaimer. If you are to stop this outbreak, you must use all haste possible. Hurry, and follow my coordinates. We must find the heart of this infestation", Spark said over Master Chief's com systems. A nav point appeared.

"I'll send you nav points until you get to where they're all coming from. Chief, please hurry!" Cortana said urgently.

"Let's go", he said. Samus nodded, and shot a beam at the hatch. It

opened, and they headed for the nav point. Reaching it, another nav point appeared. However, to get to it, they had to get through a pack of Flood that was unaware of their presence...but soon to be very aware. The group of murderous semi-zombies didn't even hear the fragmentation grenade as it rolled into their midst...but they noticed when six of the fourteen there blew apart. The frag was followed up with a dense, glowing projectile—a Super Missile. That blew three apart, and the remaining five charged Samus and the Master Chief. Samus grunted as a Combat Form landed on her, swiping its powerful claw and draining her energy shields by an entire Energy Tank. The Form went limp, a large hole in its back—the Spartan pumped the shotgun's chamber as Samus gingerly rose. Another Flood leapt at her, but Samus was ready this time, and ducked the murderous Combat Form. She paused in horror, looking at its hideous form. It was a...human! Its flesh was horribly rotted, but she could still see shreds of what had been a person... It swung its tentacle arm at her, and Samus barely ducked the blow. She rose and fired a Plasma Charge Beam at point-blank range, causing the zombie to explode in superheated flesh. Green, sticky flood washed over her visor, making Samus sick to her stomach. She shook off the feeling and turned to see the Chief facing off with the last Flood warrior. He dodged a wild swing and grabbed the Combat Form's arm as it swung by him. He planted his foot on the ex-human's chest and tore its arm off. Then, he stomped on the Flood as it fell, crushing the fragile Infection Form resting in its chest.

"We need to keep moving. No telling what we'll find", Samus commented. John nodded, wiping green fluids off of his visor using his forearm. During the brief respite, the Master Chief fed six more rounds into the firing chamber, pumping the shotgun to refresh the chamber. When they found the next nav point, another one appeared further on, and yet more Flood came with it. The loud bang of the shotgun was complimented with the roar of the Flamethrower, and the Flood in the room fell quickly to the pair's assault. A light blinked on Samus' visor, alerting her that her missiles were low. A similar light warned the Master Chief that he was low on ammo for the shotgun.

"Hmm...I could've sworn I took two boxes of shells...not just one..." John remarked. Samus opened a hatch with her Power Beam and walked towards it.

"Wait—that's not the way", the Spartan said.

"I know. It's a Missile Restock Station", she replied. Curious, the Chief walked in with her. A mechanical arm with a large, round thing on the end of it swung down and attached itself to her Arm Cannon. It spun several times, then stopped.

"Well, they're refilled. Let's keep moving", she said. Master Chief stopped her with an open palm and walked towards the station. He manually removed shells from his shotgun and placed them back in the box that held his shotgun shells. He stepped into the station and held out the barrel of his shotgun hesitantly. The mechanical arm swung down, and the round thing shrunk to accommodate the smaller muzzle of the shotgun. It spun several times, and the Chief watched in wonder as his HUD showed the firing chamber filling up with shotgun shells.

"Amazing..." he said in disbelief. The Spartan stepped away when the

shotgun was full.

"So it can make material ammo for any weapon?" he asked.

"I guess..." Samus replied, not believing what she had seen either. They headed for the next nav point.

ooo

It could see its next meal. Its meal looked tasty...and it was hungry. Very hungry. It was always hungry, but this meal looked satiating...it was pleased. In fact, there were two meals it could pick from. It scurried after them. It was hungry.

ooo

Samus opened a hatch and gasped. The main crossroads of the Chozo Temple was chock-full of Combats, Infections, and Carriers. They could both see the reason—a giant, curved piece of Halo was embedded in the center of the courtyard, surrounded by a charred, smoking crater. Two Super Missiles and the remaining three frags cleared a large number of zombies, but that attracted the swarm's attention to the two figures that had come to it. The Chief pulled out his dual Magnums and opened fire on the Carrier Forms, making them explode and causing a chain reaction of bursting Infection Forms. When most of them were cleared, he turned his attention to the Combat Forms, aiming for their chests. If a bullet hit the Infection Form resting inside, the Combats would drop like flies.

"Damn it, these things just don't give up!" Samus snarled, setting a Combat Form on fire with a charged Plasma Beam. Finally, there was one remaining Combat Form. The Chief dropped it with the very last slug remaining in his right-wielded Magnum. He ejected the spent clips and loaded two new ones in.

"Is that the last of them?" Samus asked. Almost in response to her question, three Combat Forms appeared. But...they were flying. With a very loud and bulky jet-pack. They were like no Flood the Chief had seen before. They had somewhat narrow heads, and were relatively thin. Also, they had claws on their hands and feet and a mean blade on the left arm. A blaster was gripped in the right.

"Oh, no...Pirates..." Samus breathed, almost inaudibly. John turned to face her.

"Say what?" he asked.

"Space Pirates, a race of sentient aggressor species. They're tenacious, vicious...and they just have so many different forms that they're really hard to kill", she replied, "These are Flying Pirates...or were Flying Pirates."

"This sounds fun", the Spartan grumbled. One flew straight at him. The Chief dived away at the last moment and sent five 12.5 mm bullets right into the jet pack on the Pirate-Flood. The pack hissed, caught fire, and exploded. Green Flood blood sprinkled down. Samus fired a Super Missile into the nearest Flood, causing it to explode with a bright flash in midair. The remaining one fell from its jet pack and ran up to the Master Chief, swinging its curved blade wildly. The blade drained the Chief's shields in one hit, and was about to slice

him in half when the Combat Form erupted in fire.

"Thanks", John smiled. He enjoyed being part of a team again, having someone watching his six. They heard a grating, primal screech, and saw a shadow pass over them. Samus shook with rage.

"_Ridley!_" she hissed, looking to the sky. A huge, metal dragon with orange wings was currently engaged in a struggle versus eight Flying Pirate-Flood. He breathed an orange-red beam at them, causing them all to explode. The dragon flew off, screeching in rage.

"What was _that_?" the Chief asked.

"He's the Space Pirate Leader, now that the Mother Brain is dead. He's probably my biggest nemesis, and doesn't seem to ever die", Samus replied angrily. She sighed as the Chief began to walk towards another hatch. He motioned for her to follow.

ooo

It was excited as it approached the nearer food. This food would be very, very satisfying...this it knew. With only blind hunger guiding it, it jumped.

ooo

"Well, that looks like the last of them here. Let's keep moving; I don't these Flood things will wait to take over the-" Samus started. She never finished her sentence, as a slithery, slimy something wrapped its graspers around her neck, jabbed a razor-sharp penetrator through her neck seal and into the soft flesh on the back of her neck. Samus felt a jolt as its nervous system feelers tapped her spinal cord, and mist covered her eyes.

4. Pirates and Dragons and Flood, Oh My!

Twin Parasites

By Bass GSX

A.N. I am changing my pen name to Dominus Princeps, so...just a P.S.A!

****Chapter Three: Pirates and Dragons and Flood, Oh My!****

At the very edge of her consciousness, Samus heard a shot ring out. The presence trying to dominate her mind weakened, then vanished. Samus blinked several times to clear her vision, then stood up from where she had faceplanted. Gingerly, she reached to the back of her neck and felt for the hole. She jerked her hand back as she touched the still intact penetrator. The Master Chief pulled it out in one swift motion, and Samus cried out in pain.

"Nasty little bastards, aren't they? I guess you don't have shielding, huh?" the Chief asked as he threw the tentacle away.

"No, I do. So...how did it get through?" Samus asked. John cocked his head, thinking. Then, he had an idea. He placed his hand on her shoulder. It wasn't repelled.

"You don't have a disruptive force field. That's why. My armor does. Here, try to put your hand on my body", the Spartan said. Samus shrugged and reached for him with her left hand. It stopped a centimeter from his chest and was pushed back.

"Damnation...I'll have to be extra careful around those little buggers, then", Samus muttered darkly.

"Cortana! We can't just kill every single Flood on this planet! Got any ideas?" the Chief radioed.

"Well, we can't very well blow the place up like we did with Gamma Halo. I'll consult with Spark. In the meantime, hold your position", Cortana replied. The Spartan nodded and unslung his Battle Rifle. He started his stopwatch and disassembled, cleaned, and reassembled the weapon. One minute twenty seconds. He was nearing his previous record. Samus watched the action in wonder.

"That was...amazing!" she clapped. John blushed.

"It...was nothing. I've done it faster", he replied, shrugging it off. Samus grasped his hand.

"_I_ thought it was cool...isn't that enough?" she said softly. Then, she looked at their locked hands.

"Waitâ€"if your shields are disruptive and repel things, why isn't my hand pushed back?" she asked.

"The shielding is weakened there and on the soles of my feet. I need to be able to grip things with my hands and run with my feet. If the shielding was at full strength there, then weapons would slip from my hands and I'd slide all over the place", he explained. Then, they heard a scratchy cry. It wasn't Ridley's...

"Metroids...? What are they doing this far out?" Samus asked warily. They looked up, hands dropped and weapons at the ready. A Metroid soared above them, with three Flood-Flying Pirates chasing it. The Metroid latched itself onto the nearest one and began to drain its life. Then, it stopped and wobbled away, apparently sick. This gave the Flood-Pirates a chance to kill it, and they did. Samus sighed.

"This planet is really being thrown out of whack by the Flood..." she said sadly.

"Chief, I have an idea! Guilty Spark says that Gamma Halo lost a lot of power when we blew it up, and its effective destruction radius is extremely limited. My guess, by the remaining power supply, is that we can set off Gamma Halo and it will only affect this planet and a small area outside that. Hurry, Chief! Get back to the ships so we can fly over to the Control Room!" Cortana radioed. The Master Chief nodded.

"Come on, Samus. We've got a mission", he told her. Samus nodded, having heard the AI's plan. They headed back for the ships and encountered a pack of assorted Combat Forms. The Spartan pulled out his Magnums and opened fire, while Samus burned them to the ground. A suicidal ex-Space Pirate leaped at the Chief, who sidestepped and

fired three slugs into its back. The bullets sliced through the Combat's back and hit the Infection controlling it. The rotted corpse fell. Samus was having a harder time of it. She was surrounded by four Combat Forms, and was taking heavy damage from them. Down to her last Energy Tank, Samus searched for an escape. It came as a Combat Form crumpled under one round of eight-gauge Magnum buckshot. The Master Chief pumped the shotgun to refresh its firing chamber, then ducked an ex-Elite's wild swing. He grabbed the weapon it hadâ€”a Space Pirate energy blasterâ€”and fired it point-blank into the Combat's chest. Rotted flesh and green ichor splattered everywhere, and the sickening scent of cooked flesh filtered into the Chief's helmet. Samus fried a Combat Form, sighing in relief as its frenzied charge was stopped by an intense beam of energy.

"That's the last of them. You don't look so good", John commented. Samus shrugged.

"I took a lot of damage. My shields are low, so I'll need to stop to refill them the next time we can", she replied.

"Huh? Your shields don't recharge themselves?" he asked, curious.

"No. Do yours?" Samus answered.

"Yes, actually", the Chief told her. Samus nodded.

"I see. Let's keep moving", she said. They headed into a long hall, then opened a hatch and came to an elevator.

"Well, this elevator will take us to the overworld, where we can get to our ships", Samus commented. She started the elevator and it shot upwards. About halfway up, it screeched to a halt.

"What the hell is going on?" Samus swore.

"Looks like something jammed the 'vator. Any idea how we can get out?" John commented.

"Umm...there should be a maintenance tunnel around here somewhere...ah, there! About ten feet up. See it?" Samus pointed. The Master Chief nodded.

"Right...and how do you propose we get up there?" he asked. The bounty hunter thought for a short while.

"Could you...give me a boost?" she asked sheepishly. The Spartan nodded, and crouched down, cupping his hands. Samus stepped into the makeshift platform.

"One...two...three!" the Chief counted. On three, Samus jumped and John pushed up. She rocketed into the air and grabbed onto the relatively small tunnel.

"Wait here! I'll be back!" Samus called. She converted into the Morph Ball and rolled down the tunnel. Samus came out into a large, open room. To her relief, there was a Save Station. Oddly named but extremely useful, Save Stations repaired all problems with Samus and her suit. She sighed as the soothing blue beams washed over her, charging her shields and mending the puncture in the back of her

neck. Samus looked for a control using her Scan Visor and quickly located it. She tapped a few keys and heard something rumble. Samus flipped back into the Morph Ball and was about to get into the tunnel when she was picked up and hurled across the room. She transformed out of the Morph Ball and crashed into a wall. Shaking her head to clear the stars in front of her eyes, Samus stood and charged the Plasma Beam to full power. She swept her Arm Cannon over the area, searching for a target. Her radar was full of contacts, but none were visible. She was nailed in the back and her shields drained by fifty points. Samus had a dawning moment of terrifying realization and pondered that maybe the Shadow Pirates had been taken over by Flood. She switched her visor to Thermal and saw that there were at least eight or nine cloaked zombies in the cramped room. Samus weaved out of the way of a swing and charged her Plasma Beam. Then, she flicked it to the Flamethrower and swept it across the room. Shadow Pirate-Flood shrieked as the intense stream of fire burned their corrupted bodies. When there were none left, Samus stepped once more into the Save Station. Then, she transformed into the Morph Ball and rolled back out of the tunnel. The Morph Ball bounced as it hit the elevator platform, then Samus flipped out of it.

"Neat little trick. How's it work?" John asked, curious.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not sure myself", Samus laughed. He smiled even though she couldn't see it behind the visor. Realizing this, he instinctively drew two fingers across lip-level on his visor. Samus looked at him funny.

"What does that mean?" she asked as the elevator sprang into motion.

"Oh, sorry. It's one of our-my old symbols to show I'm smiling, since no one can see my face", he replied, covering his misspeaking.

"'Our'?" Samus asked, tilting her head.

"Nothing", The Chief snapped. Samus recoiled at his harsh tone, but decided not to try and further the subject. The elevator lurched as it reached the top and slowed to a halt. The pair raced out of the circular room and out of a hatch. They found their landing site chock full of the insidious Flood. Samus switched to Thermal just to make sure there weren't any Shadow Flood. A Flying Pirate-Flood and an Elite Ranger-Flood spotted them from the air and made a suicidal nosedive for the pair. Samus and the Chief dove in opposite directions to avoid the crazed assault. The two ex-aliens crashed harmlessly (for the pair of humans) into the rock wall. The explosions, however, alerted the murderous other Flood to their aggressors' presence. The two humans, separated from one another, were finding it hard to fight the endless waves of Flood; Samus was having a particularly tough time, as she was unable to let the Infections pop harmlessly on her shields like she saw Master Chief doing.

"John! Help!" she screamed desperately as a Combat Form drained three Energy Tanks of her shields with some sort of explosive ranged weapon. She had two Tanks left. Samus heard explosive bangs getting closer and closer to her, but then she heard a hollow click. It didn't sound good, and she heard the disgust in John's growl. Samus activated her Flamethrower and melted the new wall of Flood pressing

in on her, but the weapon soon deactivated. She was out of Missiles. Samus let loose with the Plasma Beam, torching every Flood she could find until lights on her HUD warned her that the barrel of her Arm Cannon was about to melt. Samus braced herself. This was it...but then the Flood began to explode in obscene showers of blood and gore. A strange, blue wand of light was tearing them to pieces. She saw the Spartan swinging some sort of pale blue weapon wreathed in misty energy. He backed up to protect her.

"You alright?" Master Chief asked, holding the Energy Sword in a ready stance. Samus nodded and shook the fear from her mind. This was no place for weakness. As the next wall of Flood closed in, the Chief let out a roar of rage. He was mildly surprised as his anger was joined by Samus' own roar. The Flood were tough, unyielding, relentless, determined...but they lacked one asset which the pair of humans facing them had. They lacked anger...desperate rage. They were about to find out why animals backed into a corner are suddenly far more dangerous.

ooo

"Bastard", Samus grunted, stepping on a lone Infection Form. Brownish-green Flood blood was spattered liberally all over the area. Spent shell casings and ash also littered the landing site. Samus and John stood, panting, in the center of all the gore. A Combat Form with no legs dragged itself up to the Master Chief, wound back its arm, and was rewarded with a foot-and-a-half wide hole in its back from a reflex shotgun blast. That blast was the very last one in the shotgun, and the Chief had no spare ammo. He slung the shotgun over his shoulder using its shoulder strap. The pair surveyed the area.

"Empty..." Samus sighed with overwhelming relief.

"Finally", the Spartan replied. He removed his helmet, just to taste unfiltered air. Samus did likewise. They turned to face each other. Master Chief pulled Samus to him by her shoulders and held her close to him.

"I've only known you for a day, Samus, and I almost lost you there", he half-growled, half-whispered. Samus looked into his icy blue eyes with her own grey-blue ones. Tears fell down her cheeks.

"I was...so frightened. There were just so...so many of them!" she sobbed, laying her head against the cold plating of the MJOLNIR MkVI. An armored hand stroked her hair.

"Don't worry, Samus. They get too rowdy...I'll frag 'em good", John's throaty, battle-scarred voice comforted her. An annoyed voice buzzed from the Spartan's helmet.

"Reclaimer, there isn't much time. You must activate this installation's remnants, or this outbreak may not be contained. Reclaimer?"

"Samus...we should get moving. For once, that metal-head piece of trash is right. We need to start moving", the Chief said. He released Samus from his arms and pulled his helmet on. Samus did likewise. With a hum, the Master Chief's shields activated. Samus reached for his hand and was repelled.

"Sorry."

ooo

As Cortana flew the ship, the Chief checked and double-checked his arsenal of weaponry. The BR55 Battle Rifle was pretty much useless against the rampant Flood Forms, so he left it behind. An S2-AM Sniper Rifle was no good, either. Keyes and her Marines hadn't forgotten the M12 SSM Rocket Launcher, however. Its bulky shape and weight were comforting to the Spartan. He had picked four extra rocket cases for the launcher, giving him a spare eight rockets. The M90 Tactical Assault Shotgun, of course, was a necessity in the small tunnels of this planet's structures, as well as the deadly Energy Sword. Noting that it was almost dead, the Chief pulled out the spare plasma charge core he had been given and loaded it into the Sword. He pulled out the nearly dead one and placed it into the charging kit that the Arbiter had given him. It hummed softly as the battery's power was rejuvenated. The twin Plasma Rifles were left, as well. Though they had a high rate of fire, they just didn't drop Flood like other weapons...such as the dual M6C Magnum pistols he was toting. The slugs from those guns were nearly as thick as his thumb...and that was a Spartan thumb. Suddenly, Cortana's worried face lit up.

"What the hell is that?" she gasped. A sinister grey figure loomed. It appeared to be almost some sort of wraith...and not the tank, John mused darkly. Then, he recognized the vicious thing as it shrieked with malicious glee. It fired its red beam at Samus' ship. The beam missed by several feet, as the Hunter-class gunship rolled out of the destructive weapon's way. The creature, "Ridley", Samus had called it, swept the beam so it scorched the Prowler.

"Shit! We're losing altitude, Chief! I'll keep her flying as long as I can! Get all your things prepared!" Cortana shouted over the rumbling of the dying craft and the roaring of the air rushing past them. The Spartan pulled his helmet on and slung the Rocket Launcher over his shoulder, loaded the Magnums and placed them in their holsters, grabbed the shotgun, grabbed his spare ammo for everything, snapped the Energy Sword to his waist, snatched seven frags and six plasmas, and braced for impact. By his helmet clock, this had taken forty-two seconds. Everything seemed to slow down as the Chief watched the ground rise up dramatically. Under stress, that always happened...something the Spartan he once knew as Kelly called "Spartan Time". He unloaded Cortana's memory chip, much to her dismay, and stuck it into the back of his helmet. The human then grabbed the control yoke of the Prowler and guided it down as best he could. Which was, of course, not well at all. The Prowler slammed into the ground and skidded into a rock wall.

"Chief? Chief!"

ooo

"John!"

Samus pressed her hands against the plasglass window. She watched his sleek, black craft rock under the extremely focused heat of Ridley's Ultrathermal Flamestrike Projector. A tear slipped from her eye.

"No...John...!" she choked, following up with a strangled sob. Samus saw the ship hurtle downwards, leaking thick, grey-black smoke. Ridley let out a shriek of triumph and focused his attention on Samus' gunship. Her last view of the Spartan's ship was its landing. She saw it impact the ground and slide over...then strike the face of a cliff. She cried out, as if she herself was in the ship. Then, she turned to face the gunship's console, cold, unadulterated fury flowing through her veins. Samus switched the ship to manual control and faced Ridley. She hit a few keys and launched a battery of missiles at the Zebesian Space Dragon, along with four plasma bursts. The missiles impacted and knocked Ridley out of the air, and her homing plasma bursts turned his metal armor plate an angry red. Ridley crashed into a gorge, shrieking in anger and pain the entire way.

"Adam, what are you doing?" she asked between her teeth.

"I'm reassuming control of this craft, Lady. We have to stop this 'Flood'", the AI replied.

"Adam, we need to go get John! We have to!" Samus snarled.

"Lady, this is more important. This Flood may find a way off this planet, and then what? Your John isn't worth that risk, I'm sorry to say. Suit up, Lady. I don't think the resistance will be weak", Adam snapped. Samus recoiled, tears blurring her vision.

"You're...you're right. As always", she said, holding back her sobs. Samus stood from her seat and walked over to her Power Suit. She pulled it on piece by piece and primed the Arm Cannon. Missiles were full, environment systems fully functional, shielding fully charged...everything was working fine. Except her own heart.

"John...if you're alive...don't die before I find you..." Samus cried softly.

"You're the only one I've ever met who's made me feel like this..."

ooo

Ridley picked himself up from the crater he had caused.

"Ssssooo...Ssssscience Team wassssn't as bad asssss I thought...thisssss armor-plate isssss more powerful than I think _they_ even planned. Not to mention the modificationsssss to my body sssssstructure", he mused, pushing the pain to the back of his mind. The self-repairing nano-bots in his armor would tend to his wounds. For now...Ridley flapped his massive wings and lifted himself a little bit in the air. He couldn't fly very high, but for now the low-level flight would have to do. The human's craft was nearby. After a short flight, he saw it. Ridley clicked his jaws.

"Exccccccellent. Thisssss human will do niccccelly", he snickered.

"I hope you aren't planning to ambush me, you overgrown lizard,

'cause it looks like I've got the drop on _you_."

5. When Life Gives You Lemons

Twin Parasites

By Dominus Princeps

Personal note to TigerTank: Thanks for the excellent review! To give a little explanationâ€"I know most modern weapons (and certainly all the ones in the Halo series!) are not muzzle loaders, however, (and, I admit, this is a pretty weak explanation at best) the Chozo invented technology that allowed for such a reloading process. About Samusâ€"she's not used to fighting zombie things that don't seem to die, but I'll work on that. And the Chief...well, maybe he's finally opening up to someone. As for the other Spartans...wait and see. Again, thanks for the review!

****Chapter Four: When Life Gives You Lemons...****

Ridley whirled to face a green-armored figure.

"You are...not the Hunter, are you?" he hissed, clicking his talons. The figure didn't respond, but pushed some sort of tube into part of the long, cylindrical black thing it was holding.

"You shot down UNSC property. Now I'm going to make you pay for it", the Master Chief growled. Ridley cackled in glee.

"Oh, really? That'sssssss a good one, I mussssssst ssssssay. You taking down me? Ha ha ha ha...well, if you think sssso...bring it on", Ridley laughed maniacally. The human fired the first round in the rocket launcher. It detonated on the beast, but the dragon didn't even flinch.

"Material exxxxxplosssssssivessssss? Pathetic weakling! Now die!" Ridley snarled. He swung his tail at the Chief, who jumped over it and fired another rocket at Ridley. The rocket hit Ridley in the chest as he turned around. This caused the dragon some discomfort.

"Mmmmf. Ssstill, your arsenal of exxxxxplosssssivessss cannot pierce my armor. Only concentrated heat can!" the dragon snapped. John wondered why his foe had just given away his weakness. Playing the fool, the Spartan pulled out a Magnum and shot two rounds at the cyborg's chest. The bullets pinged harmlessly off the durable armor-plate. Ridley laughed again and took a deep breath. He exhaled forcefully, and with his exhale came a huge, red-orange ray of concentrated energy. The beam nailed the Master Chief in the chest and sent him flying backwards, shields drained. The beeping in his helmet stopped as the shields regenerated. Rewarded for his effort, Ridley charged another Ultrathermal Flamestrike. When he lowered his head, the Chief primed and threw a frag grenade...into the gaping maw of Ridley. For a moment the dragon was confused. Then, it was angry and pain-filled as the grenade detonated. Ridley clutched at his throat, overwhelming pain rushing through his system. Then, he felt a new pain, and looked down to face the armored human. The human had embedded some sort of energy weapon in Ridley's chest. Ridley coughed and lifted into the air.

"Pitiful _fool!_ For now, in my weakened sssstate, I cannot defeat you, but jussst you wait! I'll be back, inferior being, I'll be back!" the dragon snarled, flying haphazardly away.

"Lucky he was injured before...hate to fight him at full strength. Where did you get that sword, anyway?" Cortana asked.

"'Fulsamee. It was a gift", the Master Chief replied.

"See what you can salvage from our craft. Won't be much, but...you take what you can get, right?" Cortana sighed. The Spartan nodded and trudged over to the wrecked Prowler. Just by looking at it, he could tell the damn thing would never fly again. Wrenching part of the metal plating off, John searched around the ruined inside. His trusty Battle Rifle was still intact, along with the clips for it. However, the Sniper Rifle was bent and twisted from impact. The Chief sighed. He kind of liked that weapon. The Plasma Rifles were also broken. The soldier grabbed an extra box of rockets for his rocket launcher. All in all, the Spartan realized that he was carrying far too many weapons, but it wasn't like he could afford to leave any behind. He began to hike towards the huge fragment of Gamma Halo that was already visible in the distance.

"Well, looks like a long walk, Chief", Cortana sighed.

"Yeah...if you're the one walking", John grumbled. He could almost feel Cortana's grin...well, if she could've grinned.

ooo

Samus shook all the possible deaths John could've suffered out of her head and continued to run the system diagnostic on her armor. It was fully functional and ready to activate. Samus put the Power Suit on piece by piece and readied herself. _No more second thoughts! They may be zombie things, but I need to do this! For John...no, for the human race!_ she thought, fitting the helmet on her head.

"Lady, we're reaching the fragment of this 'Halo'. Are you ready?" Adam asked.

"...Ready as I'll ever be", Samus replied. She primed her Arm Cannon and set it to Plasma Beam. _To hell with weapon overheating...I'm firing this thing till my suit explodes!_ the bounty hunter thought with a grin. She leapt out of the ship as it landed and hit the ground running. Her shields lost a few points of power as a green blob hit them. A lone Combat Form stood on a hill with a Plasma Pistol in its rotting grip. Samus fried the beast, then faced the onslaught as Flood swarmed in from all directions. To clear her path, Samus flipped to Morph Ball and set a Power Bomb, which vaporized nearly everything within twenty feet. She jumped, then Space Jumped over the tide of Flood and landed neatly past one wall of murderous zombies. Samus' visor was reduced to static as something slammed into her, knocking her down. She saw the familiar yellow tusks...

"Metroid!" she gasped aloud. Thinking quickly, she turned into the Morph Ball and set a Bomb. The parasite was knocked off of her, and Samus switched to her Ice Beam. She brought it to bear...and froze. The Metroid wasn't clear and bloblike...its body was mottled brown,

misshapen, and rotting. Samus saw the little creature inside of it...a Flood Infection Form. Horrified, she was caught off guard as the little terror swooped again. Samus dodged just in time and froze it. The Flood-'Troid crashed to the ground and shattered into a million frozen, brown shards. Samus nearly vomited at the disgusting sight of frozen, rotted Metroid, but held her constitution. She ran away from the armada of Flood, knowing there was no way she could fight them all.

ooo

Ridley rode the air thermals, searching for his base of operations from the sky. The Space Pirates still had a decent hold on Tallon IV, even if the Hunter had dealt a serious blow the last time she had visited. He located the complex research base in the Phendrana sector. Scanning his bio-signature, the landing pad cover irised open. Ridley touched down and folded his wings. He sensed something was not right. There was an eerie silence...and no one had come to greet him and check up on him.

"Hello? Any Sssssspace Pirate perssssssonnel, ressssspond!" Ridley called. He was answered with silence. All of a sudden, there was a pounding on the door. Ridley whirled to see a hatch burst open. Ugly, brown-green figures stumbled out and leapt at Ridley, attempting to attack him. Ridley returned the favor by scorching the combatants with his Ultrathermal Flamestrike Projector, as well as blowing some apart with his Meson Bomb Launcher.

"Thessssse damned parasssssitical zzzzzzzombiessss! What in blazzzzesssss _are_ they?" Ridley hissed, halving a tenacious attacker with his taloned hands. He bludgeoned another with his tail, and swept his Flamestrike in a wide arc, frying the aggressors that were pouring in, as well as melting the wall behind them. No more attackers came. Ridley snorted and stretched, flicking pungent green-brown ichor from his claws.

"Dissssssgussssting creaturesssss. I mussssst track down their ssssourcccccce", he grumbled. The dragon crouched to fit through a hatch and began to trek through his base. More of them crashed from an adjacent room. Ridley saw with horror that they were his own troops...he even recognized one of them. They leapt with suicidal eagerness at him, knocked out of the air by bombs, superheated plasma, talons, or tail. Ridley cleared the room and hurried to the next. The rooms he entered were like the first two—the strange zombies appeared from nowhere, lunged wildly at him, died, and were gone as quickly as they appeared. Ridley shook his metallic, elongated head and snorted.

"How dissssstresssssfu! that I have not yet found a living Pirate", he muttered. Suddenly his radio pinged alive.

"M-master Ridley, is that you?" a sharp, fearful voice whispered.

"Thisssssss issssssss he. Which unit are you, and what issssss your ssssstatusssss?" Ridley said quickly.

"SpecOps, Master Ridley! We're trapped in the Metroid holding pens! The cold temperatures and high-radiation Phazon seem to have made the strange inflated parasites go dormant, but we're not sure if it's

permanent or temporary! Master, please hurry!" the frightened voice said.

"I'm near your possssition. Ssstay put. I'll be right there", Ridley replied. He cut the link and tried to open a hatch. The hatch was either locked or jammed, as it didn't open. Ridley sighed and backed up four steps. He lowered his head and rammed the hatch, sending shrapnel raining everywhere. He heard a whimper and saw the once proud Epsilon SpecOps unit cowering in a corner behind a control panel. OnePirate waved weakly at the dragon, shaking uncontrollably. Ridley saw the terrifying parasites lying all over the area, deflated and motionless. One by one he crushed the accursed beings, splattering mottled brown blood up his shined chrome legs.

"Let'sssssss get out of this hellhole, boysssssss. Follow my lead", Ridley motioned. At his commanding presence, the Space Pirates seemed to regain their confidence, and stood up. They primed their energy weapons and formed up behind the looming figure of Ridley.

"It'ssssssss going to be a long day..." Ridley sighed to himself.

ooo

Samus could hear the Flood, but she couldn't see them.

"Damn it, where are you?" she hissed, sweeping her Arm Cannon around the area. Her radar vanished as Samus decided the Thermal Visor would be more useful. She almost screamed as the Thermal Visor activated. There were Flood all around her. Samus calmed her frantic nerves, feeling the cool rush that she had come to know so well. _They haven't noticed me yet, so they aren't looking for me. _I_, however, can see them. Let the hunt begin,_ she thought. Samus charged the Plasma Beam, cursing its dull hum. Two Combat Forms wandered into her line of fire. With a violent _fwoosh_, the charged bolt of superheated energy cooked both Combat Forms. Samus switched to Combat Visor and dove behind an angular structure. _Whoever made this "Halo" sure liked angles...but I'm not complaining about all the decoration,_ she thought. Samus heard the hissing and grunting of the Flood, and listened to their footsteps. They had noticed their fallen comrades and were wondering what had caused it. Samus switched to her Ice Beam and charged it. In a fluid motion the bounty hunter darted around the decoration she was using for cover and harnessed her Beam Combo systems. A huge, white-blue missile lanced from her Arm Cannon and froze half the hallway she was facing. The huge group of Flood was encased entirely in ice. Samus calmly walked over to them and pushed them, one by one, over. They shattered, each and every one. Samus walked through an automatic door and gasped. Snow was falling lightly. She looked to her right and saw part of Tallon IV...hot, dry desert. So how was it...?

"Unreal..." she muttered to herself. Samus noticed she was on some sort of walkway. It seemed to be held in place by what appeared to be a stream of electricity that flowed from one wall onto the bridge. Samus peered over the rail of the walkway and saw a drop into a gorge. She shivered and turned back, walking along the causeway. A Combat Form suddenly scrambled into view and fired a very loud weapon at her. Samus rolled to dodge the rocket that was headed for her. The

explosion missed, but the shockwave caused her to stumble slightly. When she looked back up, the rocket Flood was joined by three of his comrades, another of which had a rocket launcher. The other two were carrying Magnum pistols. A hail of bullets suddenly greeted Samus, who rolled again, metal raindrops pinging around her. Samus fried the Flood with quick Plasma Beam blasts, losing just a few points of shielding to the pistol fire. She noted her shield level with slight dismay. According to Adam's scans, she was still pretty far from the so-called "Control Room", however, her shields were already drained by about a third of their total capacity. Also, these enemies weren't native to Tallon IV, and thus didn't have the same type of bio-energy that the Chozo Power Suit could harvest for shield energy or Missiles, which Samus was also eyeing warily. She shook her head and blasted another Combat Form that appeared, along with a trio of enterprising Infection Forms that leapt at her. As she moved on, a Carrier Form waddled out from somewhere and headed for her. Samus nailed it, then switched to her Power Beam to mop up the smaller Infections. Samus jumped and Space Jumped over one of the ubiquitous decorations. The roaring of multiple jet packs caused her to whirl. Samus was facing four Flying Flood-Pirates, and they had already loosed a swarm of missiles at her. Samus jumped to the side and charged her Power Beam. A Super Missile nailed an ex-Pirate dead-on and blew it to kingdom come. A stray missile hit Samus and knocked her off balance. She stumbled but fired off her second Super Missile. Another Pirate exploded. Samus switched to her Plasma Beam now that the Flood-Pirates were firing their blasters haphazardly. A piece of the walkway was slagged as a rain of hellish green energy hit where Samus was half a second ago. One Pirate took a Plasma Beam to the jet pack and erupted in fire. The last was put down by three Plasma Beams in quick succession. Samus sighed. With glee she saw that they had left behind three packs of Missiles and two Ultra Energies. Using the Charge Beam's tractor beam-esque function, Samus drew in the goodies. Two Energy Tanks were instantly restored, and Samus gained back fifteen Missiles. Pleased, the bounty hunter moved on.

ooo

The Master Chief continued his trek through the gorge adjacent to the area where he had crashed. Suddenly the ground began to rumble. The Chief looked around for the source, then, with horror, observed the web of fissures that snaked from his feet.

"Chief, I'm detecting extreme seismic disturbances...shit, run back!" Cortana gasped. But it was too late. With explosive force, the ground shattered into a million pieces. As the Spartan tumbled down, he caught glimpses of the cause—a gigantic, red, and indisputably angry snake-thing had reared its head, crashing through the ground. John hit the ground hard and face-flat, his shields beeping weakly. The human tasted blood, and his chest and head hurt like hell.

"We fell about three hundred feet...the shields and armor are about all that saved us", Cortana remarked.

"Us?" Master Chief grumbled, blinking slowly.

"Well..." Cortana chuckled, a little embarrassed.

"What was that thing, anyway?" the Spartan asked.

"I'm not sure. I've never seen anything quite like that", Cortana

replied. The Chief surveyed his gear. He'd landed on his Battle Rifle, crushing the weapon as if it were a piece of balsa wood. The rocket launcher was on his back and thus intact, along with the shotgun. The Magnums had come out of his side holsters and probably been smashed with the fall. The human discarded their clips, along with the Battle Rifle clips, since they were as useless as the destroyed weapons themselves. The Spartan checked his remaining arsenal. The shotgun was in prime condition, as well as its ammo. Same for the rocket launcher. The Energy Sword was still clipped to his waist. He had ten frags and twelve plasmas crammed into his belt pockets. John shook the last stars from his head and looked around. He gasped. He was on a rock platform of some sort and was surrounded by magma.

"Oh, my God! This is amazing!" Cortana chirped, storing all the visual data flooding through the Master Chief's visor camera.

"Oh, shit...I knew this was going to be a long day", the Chief muttered. He walked to the edge of the platform and saw another similar one hovering eight or nine feet away. It seemed to be kept aloft by small jets on its underside. The Spartan took a few steps back, then began running. He leapt onto the platform in front of him, then leapt to the next one, and the next one. He ended up on a "shore" of cooled and hardened lava. The Chief hit a switch and opened the hatch. He walked out into what seemed to be a large arena. There was an angular section of rock in the center, and platforms circling the rock. Master Chief saw a hatch on the far side of the room and decided to get to it. He jumped onto a platform, then leapt to another one. The Chief saw that the only way to get to the far side of the room where the hatch resided was to cross the center rock platform. It was ten feet lower than where he was currently standing, so it was an easy hop into it. As if on cue, the platforms all sank. The Chief blinked, surprised. Then, a gigantic, red snake-like creature rose from the lava that enclosed the platform. It hissed angrily at the Chief.

"Like I said...long day", John sighed. Then it struck.

ooo

"That's the last of 'em, Master Ridley", a Space Pirate growled, blasting a hole in a berserk Combat Form.

"Good work, troopssssssss", Ridley congratulated. The Phendrana Base Command Post was officially theirs. Ridley tapped a console to life and opened the Mega Turret Defense Protocol program. He entered a command to destroy all non-Pirate life forms...which the computer instantly understood. That was what the turrets were usually set on, anyway.

"Now...for the Magmoor Cavernssssssss Bassssssse...I should ssssssssecure that one, too. You sssssssstay here. I'll do it myssssself", Ridley commented. They nodded in assent.

"Of course, sir!" they saluted.

ooo

Samus bashed her way through a stuck door and sighed. She was facing a huge, snowy expanse. According to the map Adam had sent her, the

"Control Room" was through two or three gorges similar to this one. Samus spotted an upended...thing. She jogged over to it and saw that it was wheeled and had a strange-looking thing on the back with three barrels and some sort of metal shield. Samus grabbed the side of it and pulled hard. Slowly but surely it tipped, eventually coming to rest on its wheels. Samus hopped into the left side and found a round thing, two pedals, and a couple switches. Samus pressed a button that read "Ignition". The metal thing roared to life. She then looked at the two pedals. One was labeled "Brake", the other "Gas". Samus had no idea what "Gas" meant, but she pressed hard on the pedal. The thing jerked forward, accelerating quickly. Surprised, Samus released the pedal and hit the "Brake" pedal. The vehicle stopped shortly after. Samus turned the round thing. Nothing appeared to happen. She leaned out of the vehicle and turned the round thing. The wheels on the vehicle rotated their angle.

"So, this makes it go, this steers it, and this stops it. Okay, I got it", Samus said to herself. She pressed the "Gas" pedal and the vehicle accelerated straight ahead. Samus saw a hill ahead, so she turned the round thing. The vehicle turned away from the hill. With horror Samus noted a sudden drop-off. The vehicle soared gracefully off the sudden drop and landed smoothly on its wheels, bouncing slightly. Samus let out her breath and turned down another gorge.

"I knew this was going to be a long day..." she sighed.

ooo

After a literal crash course in learning how to drive the strange vehicle, Samus was finally at the end of the eerily empty gorges. She climbed the numerous ramps that lead to the Control Room. Opening the huge gate, Samus held her Arm Cannon at the ready. Nothing was on the other side. Samus jogged briskly down the long and gigantic hallways. There weren't any Flood, oddly. She reached the Control Room and headed to the holo-panel. Samus glanced at the various buttons and guessed at one. Strange script scrolled across the panel, and a deep, hollow rumble echoed throughout the chamber. Samus' Power Suit automatically translated the script. It read "Activation Successful".

6. Time Keeps On Slippin'

Twin Parasites

By Dominus Princeps

****Chapter Five: Time Keeps On Slippin'...****

The Master Chief dove out of the way of the lunge attack from the lava monster. He slid more than normal, as his shields were more slippery on the rock than the armor would've been by itself. However, he'd been trained in this suit—he knew how to deal with its strengths and its annoying gimmicks. Curling, the Spartan turned the slide into a double-forward roll. His feet gained traction at just the right moment for him to drive off of them and leap backwards away from a jet of red-hot fire that the serpent spewed at him.

"Amazing...I wonder how it projects flame from its mouth," Cortana

mused, fascinated with the beast. The Chief rolled his eyes and pulled the shotgun off of his back. It didn't have the range or accuracy that the Battle Rifle had, and the human regretted not fastening the trusty standard issue rifle tighter to his back. But what was done was done. The Master Chief leveled the shotgun with the snake-thing and fired a shot at it to get its attention. It growled in anger as a couple pellets dug into its hide. To his dismay, the others merely deflected off.

"Get closer; your shotgun will have more power at a shorter range," Cortana said as if he were a raw recruit.

"Out of the frying pan...?" the Spartan muttered darkly before shortening the gap between himself and the fire-spitting serpent. It roared and spat more fire at him, grazing his right arm as he dodged to the left. The shotgun started to glow.

"Your gun is melting! Be more careful!" Cortana warned.

"Shut up and let me fight," the Chief growled. He waited for the gun to return to a reasonable shade of gunmetal before dashing at the beast again. He ducked a jet of flame and fired the shotgun at a range of about six feet. The snake-thing howled as the eight-gauge Magnum buckshot ripped into its crimson stomach. It dove into the lava. Master Chief pumped the shotgun, and the spent shell dropped into the magma. Because of the movement of the molten rock, the Spartan couldn't get a definite reading of the thing's whereabouts using his motion sensor. Suddenly, his shields flared as magma sprayed across the arena. The Spartan barely avoided ruining the Mark VI to compliment the previous suit as he dove away from the stream of fire that came from behind him. He rolled to his feet and swung the shotgun around. Rather than use it at such an extreme (for the shotgun) range, the human pulled three plasma grenades off of his belt with one hand and slung the shotgun with the other. He primed all three and threw them one by one in rapid succession. All three stuck to the throat right below the jaw of the beast. It appeared surprised that it was being bombarded by the objects, but soon it realized that they weren't merely sticky rocks. The snake-thing howled in anguish as the trio of plasma grenades exploded on its throat. It reared back and sprayed fire randomly all around the arena. The Master Chief dashed right at it.

"What do you think you're doing?" Cortana's voice was a mix of surprise and worry.

"You don't have to like it," the Chief answered, pulling out his Energy Sword and activating it. When he reached the edge of the stone platform, he took a broad leap and wrapped his left arm around the thing's neck. He used his momentum to swing around onto its back. With a tight swing, he lopped its head off, and then quickly sprang back onto the stone platform. The Spartan turned to watch the decapitated serpent sink slowly into the molten magma.

"Well, that was an experience," Cortana chuckled nervously.

"I get a bad feeling that that wasn't the only one," the Master Chief muttered darkly. As if the snake-thing's death had triggered it, the stone platforms suddenly rose to their original positions from the lava.

"That's a little weird. I wonder how killing that serpent would've caused platforms to rise..." Cortana mused, "I can't see any kind of switch..."

Shrugging it off, the Chief took a running leap and grabbed a hold of the edge of the nearest platform. He hoisted himself up and jumped to the next one, and the next one, and the next, until he had reached the hatch into the next room. He pressed the switch to turn the shield off and stepped through the hatch into an enormous cavern.

"Oh, my God...this is entirely natural..." Cortana breathed, "Look at something else! Like the ceiling!"

"We have other issues," the Spartan reminded her. He dive-rolled to avoid a quartet of heat-seeking missiles.

"Oh. Right. Sorry," Cortana sighed, noticing the Pirates through the Master Chief's visuals.

ooo

"Well, that's that. I wish John was here to see me complete this...I guess now that this thing's activated, the Flood will be gone and I can look for him," Samus sighed.

"Excellent work, Reclaimer. You should be very proud of your effort. Your battle-skin scans as only a Class-three; my creators fought the Flood in Class-twelves," a metallic voice called. Samus whirled to face 343 Guilty Spark.

"Oh, not you...will you just leave me alone?" she called over the noise of Halo's activation.

"Unfortunately, it appears as though this ring has lost much of its original functionality. This ring will be unable to signal the other rings, and its effect will be purely local," Spark rambled on, apparently ignoring Samus.

"What does that mean?" the bounty hunter asked.

"Please specify," the AI replied.

"What do you mean by 'signal the other rings'?" Samus asked.

"When one ring is activated, it sends a signal at super-luminal speeds instructing the other rings to activate as well, increasing the effective radius of effect to twenty-five galactic radii," Guilty Spark answered.

"And, what 'effect' will be 'purely local'?" Samus inquired.

"Oh, how silly a question! Surely you must know the function of the ring!" Spark giggled in a patronizing voice.

"Remind me; I seem to have forgotten," the bounty hunter was getting irritated with the little AI.

"Originally the ring systems would terminate all life within twenty-five galactic radii, but this one is damaged, and its area of

effect would be this planet and a short distance beyond it. We have approximately two hours before it activates completely, as the fusion reactors that power this sector must be reactivatedâ€"they were abstractly shut down some time ago," Guilty Spark remarked.

"All...life?" Samus gaped.

"Well, all intelligent, calcium-containing life large enough to sustain the Flood. You seem surprised. Has your memory been so faulty?" Spark said as an afterthought. Samus took a step back. She turned to the controls for Halo and aimed her Arm Cannon at them. Samus fired Power Beams until heat waves shimmered in front of her Arm Cannon, but the Beams passed right through the semi-solid controls.

"What a foolish effort. Energy weaponry would not destroy tactile-holographical panels, and if it could, it would be too late to stop Halo's processes," Guilty Spark chuckled, bobbing in front of Samus. Samus switched to the Wave Beam, charged it up, then harnessed the Beam Combo system. A thick, undulating tendril of electricity snaked out from her Arm Cannon, striking the AI.

"Oooooooooaaaaaohhhhhwoooooow!" Guilty Spark screeched. He crashed to the ground, blue glow fading quickly. Samus kicked the dormant AI angrily. He tumbled off the transparent ring-shaped platform she was standing on. She glanced at the countdown timer her suit had automatically displayed when she activated the ring.

1:54:31.

"I've gotta get out of here and find John..." Samus muttered. She sprinted outside to where she had left the vehicle. It had a fine layer of snow over it, but Samus didn't notice as she leapt into it and turned it on. Samus pushed the acceleration pedal to the floor and was thrown back into her seat as the vehicle jumped forward.

1:52:12.

ooo

The Master Chief dodged another set of missiles and dashed across a small bridge spanning a stream of lava. He took cover behind a stack of boxes which the Pirates quickly vaporized, leaving a glowing orange thing. The Chief touched it, and suddenly he felt extra weight on his waist. Somehow, an extra box of rockets for the rocket launcher had materialized on his waist! Deciding not to complain, the Spartan shouldered the launcher, fit a pair of rockets onto it, and leveled it with one of the Flying Pirates. They jeered at him in their scratchy voices and fired more bolts of plasma. However, because they were occupied with their taunts, they didn't see the 120mm super-sonic missile that streaked at the nearest one until it was about two feet away from him. Confused, the Pirate didn't even attempt to dodge. He was blown apart as the rocket impacted and exploded. The other two were knocked off course by the splash damage and the shockwaves from the blast, giving the human a chance to lock on and fire the second rocket in the launcher. The Pirates were

expecting the menacing explosive this time, and dodged it. The Chief was forced to avoid their returning fire instead of reloading. However, his evasive tactics delayed the Pirates long enough so that by the time they heard the roaring of the rocket's return trip, it was too late for them to avoid it. The second missile hit the Pirate on the left, detonated his jetpack, and lit fire to the fuel pod on the right Pirate's jetpack, sending him tumbling into the lava, where he howled in agony for half a second. The Spartan pushed the empty rocket tube out of the launcher and loaded a full one in, then locked the pair of rockets in place. He slung the rocket launcher and walked over to the edge of the small rock island he was standing on. A platform hovered over the lava. The Master Chief jumped onto it and felt a feeling of disorientation. It seemed as though he were sinking...

"Chief, you're about to sink into the lava!" Cortana cried. The human glanced below him and saw that the lava lapped at the edge of the platform. He really was sinking! The Chief jumped hurriedly onto a higher rock outcropping that jutted out from the wall. To his amazement, the platform he had been standing on mere seconds ago began to rise steadily upwards till it leveled out at its original altitude.

"Strange...I've never seen anything like that before..." Cortana remarked.

"We haven't seen a lot of these things before," the human reminded her, mantling up to another outcropping. When he reached the top of this series of rock platforms, he stopped. A large, flat control center was in the middle of the room. The outcropping had about eighteen or nineteen feet between in and the control center platform.

"You're not about to do what I think you are..." Cortana trailed off. The Master Chief backed up as much as he could, sprinted for two or three strides, then leapt off into space. He cleared the gap and rolled to break his momentum, as the platform was not large enough for him to stop any other way. A large bridge was suspended above the platform, making it impossible for the Chief to move any further.

"Check the panels: there may be some way to lower that bridge," Cortana suggested. The human walked over to a panel and pressed a button that looked right. The bridge slowly lowered till it was level with the control center.

"How do you always know which button to press...?" Cortana wondered aloud. The Spartan shrugged and stepped out onto the bridge. He heard a rumbling, and suddenly the hatch at the bottom of the cavern exploded open. Through it came...

"I thought I had heard you in here!" Ridley cackled. He spread his wings and thrust himself into the air. But the Chief was already in the next room and barging through the hatch in that corridor by the time Ridley had reached the control center. The Master Chief ran haphazardly through the adjoining rooms and halls, taking broad leaps over rivers of lava and ignoring various monsters that crossed his path. He heard Ridley's heavy, metallic, pounding footsteps behind him...and they were getting louder.

"He's approximately one hundred yards behind you and closing...there's gotta be some way we can thwart him," Cortana informed the human. The Spartan made an impossible jump over a wide lava pool, opened a hatch, and found himself looking at a circular platform surrounded by metal rings. There was a pad to the left, and a hologram was in the center. The Chief hurriedly pressed the button on the pad and ran onto the platform. When he passed through the hologram, the platform shot upwards. The human heard Ridley's angered shrieks below him growing fainter and fainter as the elevator rose. The Master Chief let out a deep breath and shrugged his shoulders to hike the strap of the rocket launcher up higher. The elevator lurched to a halt as it reached the top of the tunnel. The Spartan walked off the platform and opened the hatch, then whirled as the elevator platform exploded. Ridley surged through the hole in it and grinned.

"Hello there, human scum! Ready to die?" he cackled. The dragon charged the Master Chief, who had already begun to flee through the adjoining halls.

"You can't run forever!" Ridley taunted, crashing through stone walls. The Chief vaulted a crumbled stone pillar and found himself in the very arena where he and Samus had fought the Flood earlier...and the place was repacked with Infection Forms, Combat Forms, and Carrier Forms. The Spartan pulled his shotgun off of his back by reflex and pumped the chamber, ejecting the spent shell in it. He fed rounds into it until it was full and ducked a wild swing from an angry Combat Form. The Chief blasted it to bits, then was thrown backwards, shields drained.

"Forget about something?" Ridley sneered, rearing back. The technologically enhanced dragon charged the prone human, who quickly got to his feet and dodged the wild attack. A quartet of Combat Forms leapt at Ridley, who swept them away with a backhand claw slash.

"How about we get rid of our buddies and then fight?" the Chief growled.

"This is much more fun!" Ridley grinned menacingly, hunkering down to sweep an Ultrathermal Flamestrike at the Master Chief. The human jumped over it and knocked a Combat Form down with a eight-gauge Magnum round as he landed. The Chief took one look at Ridley and then sprinted for the hatch behind the dragon. Surprised, Ridley didn't react until the Spartan had shouldered his way through nearly the entire mob of Flood forms. Ridley caught the brunt of a large number of exploding Carrier Forms, and was forced to retreat to take on the berserking mob of Combat Forms.

"You just wait, human! I'll get you yet!" Ridley screamed.

ooo

1:20:58.

Samus jumped over an angular sculpture and landed softly. She sprinted around a corner, was caught on a patch of ice, and slipped and fell. She slid on her back down a large hill and tumbled haphazardly when she hit level ground. When Samus finally stopped

skidding and sliding everywhere, she picked herself up and looked around. Almost abruptly, the snow stopped and grass and trees began.

"What in the..." Samus breathed. She stepped onto the grass and then stepped back into the snow, as if to try and verify the phenomenon's credibility.

"I don't believe it..." she muttered. Samus turned and gaped. Not two hundred yards away was beach! Also...an upended vehicle similar to the one she had found in the snow drifts earlier.

"They're always turned over, aren't they?" she mused.

1:17:33.

Glancing at the timer, Samus decided that there was no time to waste. She sprinted for the vehicle and yanked hard on its side. It quickly turned so that its wheels were planted in the sand. Samus hopped into the driver's seat and started the vehicle. She pushed the acceleration pedal to the floor and the vehicle spun its tires in the spongy sand and then began to move. It accelerated quickly, and Samus was soon blazing down the beach. She saw a crashed, olive-green ship and turned to drive over to it. Her Scan Visor indicated that it was in too bad condition to fly, but Samus checked for supplies. Nothing. She moved on.

1:11:20.

Samus saw a hill loom in the distance. She drove up it, turned, and saw a purple, horseshoe-shaped ship parked on a deck. Her Scan Visor informed her that the ship was in perfectly good shape. Samus jumped out of the vehicle and made a mad dash over to the ship. She found the cockpit and analyzed the controls with her Scan Visor.

"Hmm...looks like it works just like a Chozo Skimmer..." Samus muttered. She fired up the craft and turned it slowly and carefully. It shuddered as it rose; apparently, its engines were a little cold and unused. Samus glanced at her timer and winced. She took the ship higher and then pushed the throttle all the way forward. She sent a message to her ship's AI asking it to search for John's AI's frequency.

"Lady, you don't have much time to search for him..." the AI warned.

"I don't care. Locate him!" Samus growled.

"Searching...Ah. He's fleeing towards Tallon Overworld...and he's being pursued by everyone's favorite Space Pirate leader," her AI commented.

"Send me the coordinates. I'm going to go save him," Samus said, narrowing her eyes.

1:05:47.

7. So Many Ways to Die, So Little Time

Twin Parasites

By Dominus Princeps

A.N. This is the second-to-last chapter. I wish it could last forever...but have fun while it lasts. I hate to say that.

Note to J-boy: I actually did plan that out. Your idea was great! ...Unfortunately, I had already had an idea of what I wanted to do with this fic. I toyed with a similar concept near the beginning of this fic, but tossed it in favor of other things. Sorry.

****Final Chapter: So Many Ways to Die...So Little Time****

****1:00:00.****

Samus winced as the craft hit turbulence in the sky. It was rickety enough; the readouts told her that (44 percent armor integrity). She didn't need it getting rocked around by buffeting wind and pressure differences. Samus checked her map as she flew the craft. John was fleeing across Tallon Overworld...toward the Phazon Mines! If he wasn't careful, he'd end up in the very worst place to find safety! She knew she had to pick him up before he got in too far...or Ridley held him up. Something beeped on the ship's radar.

"Oh, what now?" Samus grumbled, glancing at the alien script. It was auto-translated in a text box in the middle left side of her Visor.

"INCOMING SHIP...SCAN...INFIDEL 'PELICAN' GUN AND PERSONNEL DEPLOYMENT VESSEL...D-CLASS"HEAVIER WEAPONRY...INCOMING FROM PORT, WILL INTERCEPT IN APPROX. 3 MINUTES 20 SECONDS. DETAILS..." the text box read. Samus yanked the craft to the right to avoid an air-to-air missile that streaked past her ship and curved for a return attack. Samus activated the anti-missile systems and watched in mild amusement as several other missiles along with the first were slagged and detonated by the two plasma turrets on the underside of her craft. The sound of metal being pounded with metal almost made Samus jump. What was that sound? She then recognized it as"what had John called them?"bullets. A window popped up on her visor to correspond with the one on the ship's monitor. The armor integrity was at 42 percent and dropping at a rate of .5 percent every five seconds. Deciding to fight back, Samus activated the auto-turrets and tried to avoid the heavy fire she was taking. The turrets on her craft sent purple bolts of plasma streaking at the enemy ship. The turrets, being computer-controlled, had near perfect accuracy and sought critical points on the enemy ship"namely, the large engines on the wings and tail. The olive-drab ship chasing Samus erupted in gouts of flame before nose-diving. Samus wiped her brow and found her way again from where she had deviated in an attempt to dodge.

****0:49:29**.**

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The Master Chief dove through a waterfall and inwardly groaned as he

fell twenty feet into a deep lake. The rocket launcher was now useless, as its rockets were waterlogged, and the shotgun was equally dead. He was unsure about the Energy Sword, but decided to keep it anyway. It held sentimental value, if not combat purpose. The human discarded the two useless weapons and ran as best he could through the lake.

"Chief...that dragon is behind the waterfall. Get to the lowest point in this lake; it's murky, and unless he's got extremely good vision, you'll be invisible," Cortana advised. Deciding to trust her judgment, the Spartan made his way to the bottom of the lake. He saw a huge red blob on his motion tracker appear, then just as quickly vanish. Ridley was waiting. The human crouched on the lakebed. The blob moved away and left the motion tracker display. The Chief headed for shore and surfaced, water running down his shields.

"Aha!" Ridley screeched, leaping through the waterfall and swooping down at the human.

"Whoops...he wasn't gone, was he?" Cortana gulped as the Spartan literally tore a hatch open.

"And you're the clever one?" the Master Chief muttered, sprinting down the corridor.

"You've gotta stop him somehow, Chiefâ€"you can't keep running forever!" Cortana said.

"When you find me some weaponry, I'll fight him. For now I'll keep looking for a place to hide or a powerful weapon myself," the human growled. He reached an elevator, pressed the activation switch, and jumped onto the platform as it shot downwards. Ridley peered down the shaft, grinned, and leaped down the shaft. The Chief reached the bottom, saw Ridley blazing down the shaft, then had an idea. He pressed the activation switch and ran away through a hatch. He heard Ridley screech in surprise, then heard a crash and a pained roar, and then he heard the sound of Ridley decimating the remaining platform. But by then the Master Chief was already dashing across what appeared to be a chain-link bridge. Below the bridge was a strange, pulsing, and eerily blue material.

"Oh, my God...the radiation emanating from this substance is unbelievable. There are so many alpha, beta, and gamma particles that your nuclear battery for your suit is actually recharging...and that shouldn't even be possible," Cortana gaped disbelievingly. The Chief barged through a hatch and was greeted by a patrol of Space Pirates. He pulled out his Energy Sword and pressed its activation button. The cool blue blade hissed as it appeared.

"Durable," he remarked, dodging a barrage of green plasma. The Spartan stabbed a nearby Pirate and took his blaster. He turned the technology on the Pirates, gunning them down one by one. By this time, Ridley had already burst through the hatch that Master Chief had used to enter.

"Nowhere to run, human! It's time for you to die; I'll deal with the Hunter later!" Ridley roared. The Chief took a deep breath and, with his two plasma blasters, opened fire at Ridley's chest. The dragon roared and lowered his head. The hot plasma bolts struck it in the mouth, and Ridley reared back in pain, exposing his chest. The

Spartan dropped his blasters, pulled out the Energy Sword, activated it, and sprinted at the vulnerable mecha-dragon. He took a broad leap and landed on Ridley's chest. The human brought the Sword high above his head, then slashed a quick double-diagonal slash, making a white-hot X on the dragon's chest. Ridley howled in agony, stumbling backwards. The Chief lost his footing and fell down, but quickly recovered and jumped back onto Ridley's melting chest armor. He stabbed Ridley in the chest, causing the dragon to writhe in pain. The Master Chief stabbed the dragon again, and a third time, and a fourth. Ridley gasped, struggled to breathe, then toppled over. The Chief stepped away and deactivated his Energy Sword. Ridley lifted one claw and stretched in an attempt to grab the human's leg. The Spartan stomped on Ridley's claw, slamming it to the ground and crushing it. The feral crimson of Ridley's eyes faded. The Chief breathed out a sigh and turned back toward the hatch. In his haste, Ridley had near destroyed the bridge, but the human could still use it. He walked into the elevator room and saw a small piece of the elevator still attached to the mechanism that raised and lowered it. It looked large enough to hold him, so the Chief pressed the activation switch and dove for the fragment before it shot upward. He caught onto it and hoisted himself up as it ascended. When it peaked, the Chief leaped toward the edge of the shaft and hoisted himself up. He walked through the hatch but whirled when he heard a horribly twisted screech. It sounded almost like Ridley's...but that was impossible!

"There's no way...we watched him die!" Cortana breathed. The Spartan watched in horror as Ridley's wings appeared, then the rest of his body. His eyes weren't red...they were dead black. The Master Chief looked at Ridley's mutilated chest and realized with horror why the dragon had reanimated. A tiny Infection Form had lodged in the chest cavity.

ooo

0:31:59.

"They've changed direction again! They're headed for where we originally landed!" Adam informed Samus.

"Right. I see them," Samus replied. She continued her flight. Soon, she could see the Overworld. Samus banked to intercept John and Ridley. She saw the pair running through a rain-soaked plain and dropped altitude. She accessed John's radio.

"John! It's Samus! I'm right over you!" Samus cried.

"That's you? A little help would be appreciated!" John growled, ducking a Meson bomb explosion. He leaped over a stream and jumped up some rock ledges. Samus banked the craft again and brought it lower. John took a running leap and dug his fingers in the side of the craft, punching holes in its armor. Samus took off. She could hear him climbing along the craft's horseshoe-shaped levitators. The sound of screeching metal announced his entrance as he peeled the armor back so that he could enter.

"We're going to get to my ship and get the hell out of here!" Samus informed him.

"Why the rush?" John asked.

"I've activated the Halo-thing. We've got..."

0:27:22.

"Less than half an hour to get off this planet!" she finished.

"Are you serious?" Cortana asked.

"Dead serious. Now we've-" Samus began. The craft shuddered, and a red-orange beam of plasma sliced through the craft.

"We're dead in the air! Bail!" Samus cried. The Master Chief jogged to a wall, tore it open, and leaped out. Samus followed. They fell five hundred feet into a lake, creating an enormous splash. The two of them dashed out and burst through a hatch. Meson bombs rained around them as the Flood-Ridley opened up on them.

"So explain to me what happened here?" Samus asked as they dashed through a rock hallway.

"I killed him, but the Flood got into him. I've got a bad feeling that that just made him a lot stronger," John replied. They entered an elevator shaft and found that it had a huge hole in it.

"Ridley burst through this when he was chasing me earlier. It leads to-" the Master Chief began.

"Magmoor Caverns. It'll bring us to where we wanna go." Wraith Desert," Samus remarked.

"You have such nice names for your places," Cortana chuckled.

"Geronimo!" the Spartan cried, leaping down into the hole. Samus jumped down after him. She looped her arms around his waist as they dropped.

"There's no way you'll survive this fall without my help," she explained.

"Keep it clean, you lovebirds," Cortana snickered. The Chief rapped his helmet with his knuckle.

"Alright, already," the AI shrugged. Thirty feet from the bottom, Samus activated her Space Jump thrusters and dumped energy into them from her power cell. The jets roared with power and slowed their fall...but didn't stop it. The two of them crashed to the ground.

"Hurt?" the Chief asked.

"I'm fine. You?" Samus replied.

"Fine. Let's go," he answered.

0:22:43.

They leaped across islands in the lava and reached a hatch across a lake of lava.

"This way!" Samus pointed. She led John by the hand through a room full of more lava and also gigantic red serpents.

"I fought one of these earlier," the Chief muttered.

"They're called Magmoor. Nasty creatures," Samus responded. She opened a hatch and was faced with a legion of Flood.

"We don't have time for this!" Cortana warned.

****0:19:09.****

Samus overcharged her Space Jump thrusters again and pulled John with her high into the air.

"Hang on!" she said, maneuvering toward the hatch at the far end of the room. Suddenly, her jets faltered, and the two of them tumbled into the lava. Red covered the Master Chief's vision, and his shields drained steadily away. He looped one arm around Samus' waist and leaped up onto a nearby island. The woman seemed to be unconscious, so the Chief set her on his shoulder and sprinted at the hatch. He rammed it open and dashed down the hallway. An elevator came into view. The Master Chief hit the activation switch and jumped onto the elevator. Samus groaned and opened her eyes.

"Where...what happened?" she murmured.

"You blanked on me when we hit the lava. We're headed for the surface. You ready to run again?" the Master Chief asked.

"Let's do it," Samus said as he set her down.

****0:15:55.****

They burst through a hatch and were greeted with a blast of sand. They sprinted out into the desert, following Samus' directions to reach her ship. Suddenly, they found themselves surrounded by Flood that had mysteriously appeared out of the swirling sands. The Chief brandished his activated Energy Sword, and Samus equipped her Plasma Beam. She charged it up and let loose with the Flamethrower at the same instant that her partner began hacking at the Flood forms. When an opening appeared in the mob, they dashed through it. They reached the cave where Samus' ship was parked...but it was gone!

"Where in the..." Samus began.

"Lady, I had to take off, as Flood had begun to attack the ship. I'm five miles downwind from you; start running and I'll pick you up!" Adam informed Samus.

"On our way! Let's go!" Samus grabbed the Chief's hand and tugged him with her.

****0:11:17.****

The pair ran with the raging winds at their backs. They heard a roaring and looked up. A black shape was over them.

"That's him!" Samus cried.

"I...don't think so," the Spartan said. The shape landed and screeched over the wind.

"That's Ridley," the Chief grimaced, holding his Energy Sword in a ready stance.

"I'll keep him busy; you go for the chest!" Samus said.

"Right," the Master Chief agreed. He waited as Samus shot Power Beams to distract the Flood-infested Ridley. When its attention was on the bounty hunter, the Chief ran at it and jumped onto its back. Confused, the ex-dragon swatted at the human on its back with crushed right claws. The Chief was knocked off Ridley's back and tumbled over in the sand.

"John!" Samus was momentarily distracted. In that moment, she was struck with a devastating bludgeonâ€”Ridley's tail. Blood spattered over the inside of her visor, making visibility difficult. Not as if it would've mattered in the swirling sandstorm.

0:09:29.

Samus heard a battle roar at the edge of her consciousness. She was vaguely aware of a figure stepping over her carrying a bright blue wand of light. Samus heard the scream of something in her foggy consciousness...was it her own? She wasn't sure. A coppery taste filled her mouth.

0:08:57

The Master Chief slid under a slash from the Flood-dragon and swiped at its left leg. The limb was severed at the shin, but the dragon carried on, shifting its balance to its right leg. The Chief leaped up and wrapped his arms around the dragon's neck. It clawed at him but couldn't pry him off. When his shields fell, the claws gouged rivets in the titanium-A plate of the MkVI, but the Spartan hung doggedly on until the dragon halted its thrashing momentarily. In that moment, the human plunged his Energy Sword deep into Ridley's chest, vaporizing the Infection Form resting inside. Ridley suddenly went limp and toppled over. The Master Chief ran over to Samus' body.

0:06:36.

"John..." Samus croaked. He could see the blood on the inside of her visor. She had taken a brutal blow from Ridley's tail...and the muscles that were already incredibly powerful were exponentially intensified by the Flood.

"It's okay. We'll be okay," the Chief reassured.

"John...it's an angel..." Samus whispered. Her head lolled backward. John looked upward and saw what she had seen. The ship was landing. He leaped up, grabbed the edge, and pulled himself up with one hand, using the other to hang onto Samus. He dropped into the hatch and set Samus down.

0:05:44.

"Get out of here. Now!" Cortana said to Adam.

"Don't be so pushy; I was going," the ship AI huffed. The ship rocketed up out of the sandstorm, reaching turbulence as it hit the higher air.

0:03:12.

"Can you fly any faster?" John asked Adam.

"I'm flying as fast as the reactors will allow," the AI responded nervously. They reached the outer atmosphere, and then they were in space.

0:02:06.

The Master Chief took off Samus' helmet and then removed his own. He cradled her unconscious body in his arms, holding her close to his chest. Her arms wrapped around his neck.

0:01:01.

"How much farther till we're out of the radius of effect?" the Spartan asked.

"500 kilometers. But it isn't a straight shot...there's some debris from a frigate that we need to maneuver around..." Adam replied. Samus coughed; her eyes fluttered open.

"I'm...I'm scared," she whispered.

"It's okay. We'll be okay," John tried to sound strong. But, in his entire career he had never expected his death more than at this moment.

0:00:38.

"Almost at the edge..."

0:00:29.

The ship rocked as it hit a stray piece of black metal.

"We're losing speed!" Cortana cried.

0:00:14.

"Dumping all reactor power into engines..."

0:00:09.

"So close..."

0:00:06.

"John...I love you."

0:00:03.

"Samus, I..."

****0:00:00.****

At that instant, the planet Tallon IV and the approximate five-hundred kilometers around it suddenly glowed bright purple. The glow lasted four thousandths of a second and was suddenly gone. Tallon IV was dead. About the only things left on it were the plants and insects. There were no intelligent forms of life left on it, and no calcium-containing life forms large enough to sustain Flood left, either.

"...Love you, too," John finished as the ship drifted. Its reactors were shut down and cooling at the moment. Samus smiled weakly and then fell unconscious again.

"I swear our margin of escape gets smaller and smaller every time we do things like this..." Cortana mused. The Master Chief sighed.

"I'm getting too old for this..."

8. Epilogue: Just a Memory

Twin Parasites

By Dominus Princeps

A.N., I'll grant you, this is a pathetic chapter for how long it took, but even with summer's aid I haven't had much time. The hint of a sequel should be enough for you salivating fans.

****Epilogue: Just a Memory...****

"Yes, sir, we'd like to buy condo number forty-eight," John said to the man at the front desk.

"I'll draw up the contract, Mr...?" the salesman trailed off.

"Hundredseventeen. John Hundredseventeen," John replied. The salesman paused, then wrote it down. Samus came into the room.

"Got everything worked out?" she asked.

"It's coming along. We'll have a place of our own soon," John nodded.

"Hard to believe that we're already past what happened on Talon Four..." Samus sighed.

"Yeah. But it's over. Now it's just a memory to us. Just a bad memory," he remarked.

"Not all of it was bad," Samus smiled slightly, grasping John's hand.

"Well, I'll grant you that," John returned the smile.

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"Dear me, this purification is most disorderly. I must say that those two Reclaimers did a very disorganized job when it came to this kind of work. They didn't even pursue the two ships full of Flood and the strange parasite that left this planet. I should perhaps alert them to their folly and bring them back to purge this threat. That is what I shall do. I am a genius. Hee hee hee!"

ooo

"You'll be awake soon, Master Ridley...what little we could salvage should be enough to recreate you...I promise that this time there'll be no weaknesses in your armor. I promise you that."

****Fin****

So...sequel or no sequel? You tell me, my friends!_

End
file.